

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000374

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: FUROR OVER ATATURK'S DAUGHTER'S ARMENIAN ANCESTRY
EXPOSES TURKISH RACISM

11. (sbu) Summary: Recent claims reported in two Turkish newspapers that the late Sabiha Gokcen -- Ataturk's adopted daughter and Turkey's first female pilot -- was Armenian have exposed an ugly streak of racism in Turkish society. The reports led a number of prominent figures to make racist remarks "defending" Gokcen, which in turn prompted criticism from more open-minded columnists. Perhaps the most alarming result, however, has been an intensely personal campaign by die-hard nationalists against the editor of the Armenian weekly newspaper that first broke the story. End Summary.

12. (u) On February 21, the Hurriyet daily newspaper reprinted a claim that had been published two weeks earlier in the Armenian weekly newspaper AGOS to the effect that Sabiha Gokcen, the adopted daughter of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and Turkey's first female pilot, was of Armenian descent. The claim, based on genealogical research by one of Gokcen's descendants, is not considered particularly new or noteworthy among Armenian circles. Nevertheless, its widespread circulation in Hurriyet prompted many prominent figures to make racist and insulting remarks:

-- Hurriyet columnist Emin Colasan wrote two editorials last week on the subject. Colasan asks why such claims were put forward when it is obvious that "dead people can't defend themselves" against such "slander and lies."

-- The Turkish Air Association (founded by Ataturk to promote the Turkish Air Force) released a statement describing the "completely fabricated and unfounded" reports "not merely as an insult to Gokcen, but also as an insult to Ataturk."

-- The Turkish General Staff (TGS) issued a statement criticizing the reports regarding Gokcen's ethnic origin as an "unfounded and unfair campaign against Ataturk nationalism" and "a claim that abuses national values and feelings."

(Note: In contrast to the TGS statement, Aegean Army Commander General Hurshit Tolon earlier commented that if Gokcen was Armenian, it is important proof of the "greatness" of Turkish nationalism and Ataturk's vision. "It means" he said, "that Ataturk understood many years ago that ethnic origin has no importance in a globalizing world." End Note).

13. (u) Others, including columnists Oktay Eksi (Hurriyet) and Sahin Alpay (Zaman), criticized the racist tone of these responses. Alpay put his finger on the crux of the controversy in his February 28 column. "Because Turkish identity has been defined... as "those who adopt Turkish culture, share Islamic beliefs, and speak Turkish," anybody falling outside this definition was not considered part of national society. While these politics may have been unavoidable during the republic's formation, in today's circumstances they represent a threat to Turkey's national unity and territorial integrity... In order to achieve the ideal of a modern, free, and democratic Turkey, we need to accept that no matter their language or religion, everyone with citizenship and a bond of devotion to the Turkish Republic is a Turk."

14. (sbu) More worrying than this exchange is the fact that the publication of these claims has led die-hard nationalist members of the Istanbul branch of the Nationalist Action Party-affiliated "ideological hearths" to launch a personal campaign attacking Hrant Dink, the editor of AGOS. While Dink has not been specifically criticized for publishing the story on Gokcen, the publicity it generated prompted some nationalists to use a previous Dink editorial to label him as a "traitor." (Note: In the article in question, Dink urges Armenians to put aside their poisonous obsession with Turks and the "genocide" and to focus instead on Armenia and develop a positive Armenian identity. He is accused of

labeling Turks as "poisonous." End Note). This campaign has so far included hostile phone calls to Dink and a February 26 demonstration outside the AGOS offices by 40 or so aggressive, taunting protesters. Clearly distraught and upset by the attacks, Dink confessed to poloff that he has even considered abandoning the newspaper.

15. (sbu) Comment: These developments spotlight the racism underlying Turkish nationalism. The outrage by Turkey's secular establishment also reflects its hyper-sensitivity to any perceived attacks on Kemalist ideology. We can expect that any attempt to debate establishment-imposed notions of secularism or the meaning of Turkishness will continue to bring out sentiments incompatible with Turkey's professed adherence to universal norms or EU standards.

ARNETT